



MEMORANDUM

To: Council Members

AGENDA ITEM 12

From: Staff

Date: October 18, 2019

Subject: Regional Passenger Rail Update – Steven Abrams, SFRTA Executive Director and Russell “Rusty” Roberts, Brightline Vice President of Government Affairs

Introduction

The purpose of this item is to provide an update regarding current and proposed passenger rail service in southeast Florida, including both the Tri-Rail commuter rail service, operated by the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority (SFRTA), and the Brightline/Virgin Trains USA (Brightline) intercity passenger rail service, operated by Florida East Coast Industries (FECI). A map illustrating the Tri-Rail future service corridors is included as Attachment 1, and a map illustrating Tri-Rail, Brightline, and Amtrak rail services is included as Attachment 2. Steven Abrams, Executive Director of SFRTA, and Russell “Rusty” Roberts, Vice President of Government Affairs for Brightline, will provide updates on both services.

Background

Southeast Florida’s economy, mobility, and quality of life are dependent upon a reliable, multimodal transportation network. The Strategic Regional Policy Plans of both regional planning councils place a high priority on the continued operation and expansion of passenger rail service as a component of the larger transportation network. Southeast Florida includes three passenger rail systems operating today:

- (1) Tri-Rail commuter rail service has been operating since 1989 on the South Florida Rail Corridor (SFRC), which is the former CSX rail corridor, between Mangonia Park and Miami International Airport. The Tri-Rail service is operated by the SFRTA, which is a public agency governed by a ten-member board. For more than ten years, Tri-Rail has been working with the two regional planning councils, local governments, the Florida Department of Transportation, metropolitan planning organizations, and others to extend service onto the Florida East Coast (FEC) rail corridor. Referred to as the Tri-Rail Coastal Link (TRCL), the FEC service is organized with four segments, listed below in order of likely phasing:

- a. Downtown Miami-Link is anticipated to begin operation in 2020 and provide service from the SFRC corridor into Brightline's Miami Central Station on the FEC rail corridor, with service potentially extending to Midtown. The station and platform have been constructed, and an access agreement has already been established between FEC and SFRTA to allow service into the station. However, prior to the initiation of Tri-Rail service, Brightline must complete the installation and certification of Positive Train Control (PTC), which is a federally required electronic communications and automatic braking system to improve safety and monitoring of passenger and freight trains operating together on rail corridors. Once PTC is certified for Brightline operations, PTC must then be certified for Tri-Rail operations before Tri-Rail service can be initiated.
 - b. Northeast Corridor Link would provide service on the FEC rail corridor from Miami Central (or possibly Midtown) to northern Miami-Dade County. The Miami-Dade Transportation Planning Organization (TPO) and Miami-Dade Department of Public Works are leading efforts to advance this segment.
 - c. Jupiter Extension would provide service from the SFRC corridor onto the FEC rail corridor from West Palm Beach to Jupiter. The Palm Beach Transportation Planning Agency (TPA) is leading efforts to advance this segment.
 - d. Central Segment would provide service on the FEC rail corridor from northern Miami-Dade County to West Palm Beach. This segment could ultimately be broken into smaller segments due to its length and infrastructure demands. The Florida Department of Transportation is leading efforts to advance this segment as part of the larger TRCL service.
- (2) FECI's Brightline high-speed passenger rail service has been operating on the FEC rail corridor since January 2018.
- a. Phase 1 began operating from West Palm Beach to Fort Lauderdale in January 2018 and was extended to Miami in May 2018.
 - b. Phase 2 from West Palm Beach to Orlando International Airport (OIA), began construction in June 2019 and is expected to be completed in mid-2022, when Brightline anticipates it will begin revenue service into its OIA station. This segment will include an additional station in Cocoa as well as potential stations in Stuart or Fort Pierce.
 - c. Phase 3 would provide service from OIA to downtown Tampa, with additional stations anticipated in Orange County (to interconnect with the SunRail system) and Disney World.
 - d. Phase 4 would provide service from Orlando (or Cocoa) to Jacksonville, which would presumably include potential stations in Daytona Beach and St. Augustine.

In addition to the above-noted stations, Brightline has recently received approval for funding through Miami-Dade County for a station in Aventura (see Miami Herald article included as Attachment 3). According to company representatives, active negotiations are underway with the City of Boca Raton, and preliminary discussions are underway for potential stations at Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood International Airport and PortMiami. Although other potential station locations have been discussed in public meetings (including in the City of Palm Beach Gardens), Brightline representatives indicate there are currently no active discussions to add additional infill stations at this time.

- (3) Amtrak currently operates two daily overnight round trip intercity passenger trains through southeast Florida on the SFRC and CSX (the Silver Meteor and the Silver Star). These trains serve Miami, Hollywood, Fort Lauderdale, Deerfield Beach, Delray Beach, and West Palm Beach in the region on a route that connects Miami and New York City. Tickets are not sold for intra-region trips between Miami and West Palm Beach so as not to compete with Tri-Rail.

Analysis

The extension of TRCL service on the FEC rail corridor will require significant coordination among local governments, transportation agencies, the FEC Railway, FECI/Brightline, and other public agencies. Among the many challenges to be addressed, the completion of PTC and negotiation of access fees between SFRTA and FECI/Brightline are among the most critical. Access fee negotiations for the Northeast Corridor are being led by the Miami-Dade TPO and Department of Public Works, which could inform a fee structure for the balance of access needed for the remaining TRCL segments.

Conclusion

The continued operation and expansion of passenger rail service is a critical component of the regional multimodal transportation network. Continued dialogue between public agencies and FECI/Brightline is essential to enable the extension of additional passenger service through the region and to assist in the public understanding of how the various services operate.

Recommendation

For informational purposes only.

Joint Council Action – October 25, 2019

Attachments

1. Tri-Rail Future Service Corridors
2. Southeast and Central Florida Rail Systems (Existing, Proposed, and Conceptual)
3. October 11, 2019 Article from The Miami Herald
4. NARC Award Announcement

Tri-Rail Service

Tri-Rail Coastal Link

Future Segments



1. **Downtown Miami-Link (2019)**
Service to Miami Central
Potential Service to Midtown
2. **Northeast Corridor**
Miami Central/Midtown to Aventura
Corridor Studies Underway
(Miami-Dade County & Miami TPO)
3. **Jupiter Extension**
West Palm Beach to Jupiter
PB TPA Leading Efforts to Advance
Station Planning Underway
4. **Central Segment**
Aventura to West Palm Beach
Future Pending Project



Southeast & Central Florida: Passenger Rail Systems & Concepts



Miami Herald

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Miami-Dade approves \$76 million to bring Brightline trains to Aventura Mall

BY DOUGLAS HANKS

OCTOBER 11, 2019 06:49 PM, UPDATED OCTOBER 11, 2019 08:43 PM



Brightline trains could be running from downtown Miami to Aventura within a year after Miami-Dade commissioners approved paying \$76 million to build the for-profit rail company a station connecting to the Aventura Mall.

Friday's lopsided vote came despite concerns about fares being [too pricey for everyday commuters](#) and what the deal with the company behind Virgin trains would mean for the prospects of the Tri-Rail commuter line ever starting service along the same corridor.

But with transit ambitions stalled or subdued across Miami-Dade, commissioners seized on a rail option that brought no yearly operating costs or need to build new tracks.

"We have been talking for years," said Commissioner Rebeca Sosa, on the board since 2001. "If we sit down and do nothing, nothing will ever happen in this county. ... So it's time for us to step up and start."

Brightline may only charge passengers between Aventura and Miami 65 percent of what it would cost to ride one of the company's trains from Miami to Fort Lauderdale, currently the next stop after downtown Miami. Using today's fares, that would make a one-way ride to Aventura about \$9.75, more than four times the \$2.25 Metrorail charges.

"How many people are we actually going to serve here? Because it's not a commuter rail," said Commissioner Joe Martinez, who represents a suburban district miles away from the county's Metrorail system. "The fares, I think, will be out of the reach of a lot of people."

The Brightline proposal briefly died at the emergency commission meeting arranged by Mayor Carlos Gimenez to consider the deal for a county-funded station. Martinez, Daniella Levine Cava, Jean Monestime and Xavier Suarez initially voted against it, denying Gimenez the two-thirds vote required under county rules governing a no-bid development contract.

Monestime switched to a Yes after negotiating a concession on the spot, with both Gimenez and Brightline's Jose Gonzalez agreeing to make any residential development on the property dedicated to workforce-housing units, which typically charge below-market rents.

"We have a crisis when it comes to mass transit," Monestime said. "We have a crisis when it comes to housing. I think if we're going to contribute such a large amount of money to developing the site, I'd like them to take that into consideration."

The Brightline proposal, made public 11 days ago, was the first significant commission debate since [multiple term-limited commissioners filed to run for mayor in 2020](#). Levine Cava, Monestime and Suarez are all running to succeed a term-limited Gimenez, as is Commissioner Esteban "Steve" Bovo, who endorsed the Brightline plan. "I think it's important that we leave a footprint, to say, 'Look we got something done,' " he said.

Martinez left before the final vote on the proposal, leaving Levine Cava and Suarez the only two on the No side.

Brightline's tracks run on private land that was once part of the old Henry Flagler railroad system, and running commuter trains on that land has been a transit goal in Miami-Dade for decades. That stretch was dubbed the "Northeast Corridor" in Miami-Dade's 2016 reset of transit studies known as the SMART Plan, which is developing new transportation plans for six of the county's busiest commuting routes.

With Friday's deal, the Northeast would have a new rail stop well before any of the other corridors could.

Miami-Dade already approved a rapid-transit bus route for the South corridor, where Metrorail had once been slated for expansion, and the commission isn't scheduled to consider proposals for the SMART route to Miami Beach until the spring. The other corridors are awaiting action by the commission or other county boards.

"It means that's there an expansion of rail service for commuters here in Miami-Dade," said Gimenez, [who in 2016 aired a reelection ad on a Metrorail car](#) with the headline More Rail Lines. "I kept my promise."

Miami-Dade plans to spend up to \$76 million on the new station at the 19700 block of West Dixie Highway, which would include a pedestrian bridge over the highway and Biscayne Boulevard connecting to the Aventura Mall. The county would use reserves from its half-percent sales tax, the main source of money for transit expansion, to fund the agreement. Brightline would serve as developer of the station, but Miami-Dade would continue to own the real estate once purchased.

While Brightline would pay to operate the new train service, Miami-Dade may end up contributing significant dollars to the rail line's operations in the future.

Gimenez said the county planned to negotiate a potential subsidy to lower Brightline fares closer to what transit users pay on Metrorail. Gimenez stopped short of endorsing that kind of deal, which several commissioners said they wanted.

"If we want to reduce fares further, there is a subsidy we probably need to negotiate with them," Gimenez said, noting the county's bus and rail networks generate a fraction of their operating costs through fare revenue. "Anybody who steps into any of our systems are being subsidized right now."

[The deal](#) projects an opening date for the three-acre Aventura station and park-and-ride commuter lot in October 2020, but Brightline has until late 2022 to launch service or risk losing the agreement. The company agreed to run trains every 30 minutes during what it defines as rush hour — 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. — and reserve 20 percent of a train's seats for the discounted Aventura rates until 48 hours before departure time.

After that, the seats would be available to any passenger, including those paying the discounted rate to Aventura and those paying the highest rate for the full Brightline route to West Palm Beach.

The trip is expected to take about 15 minutes from Miami, with trains pausing for less than two minutes in Aventura before rolling on to the next stop.

Brightline also agreed to design the station so that a Tri-Rail platform could be added at a later date. The fate of Tri-Rail's expansion plans [loomed over the Aventura proposal](#), since Brightline is a key player in the tax-funded commuter rail's future.

Tri-Rail was supposed to start service in 2017 to a platform in Brightline’s downtown MIami station, a depot Tri-Rail and local governments spent about \$70 million to build. Brightline said delays in implementing and winning regulatory approval for safety upgrades mandated by new federal railroad laws may delay the start until well into 2020.

Brightline’s rail corridor also is the potential future “Coastal Link” for Tri-Rail, which would run commuter trains making multiple stops on tracks running alongside the for-profit trains. That idea of parallel tracks, one for the express Brightline service and one for local stops from Tri-Rail, requires Brightline to sign the kind of access agreement with Tri-Rail that has yet to materialize.

The agreement approved Friday states talks will continue with Tri-Rail, which endorsed the Aventura station plan. With Brightline not yet striking a deal with Tri-Rail and now expanding into at least one shorter stop, the Aventura station has raised the possibility of the for-profit company opting to provide commuter service on the corridor instead of Tri-Rail.

Jose Gonzalez, a top executive at Florida East Coast Industries, which owns Brightline, said he still expected Tri-Rail to pursue stations between Miami and Aventura.

“That’s not our business model,” he said of the local stations requiring frequent stops by commuter trains. Aventura was uniquely attractive, Gonzalez said, because it offers Florida’s largest mall in the midst of a built-out area between two existing Brightline stops.

“It’s a halfway point,” he said, “and it’s a more dense area that has a lot more opportunities for ridership.”



Richard Branson unveiled the first step milestone of "Virgin Trains USA" at the Virgin MiamiCentral station in downtown Miami, Florida, on April 4, 2019. BY CARL JUSTE



Commissioner Rebeca Sosa supported a \$76 million proposal by Mayor Carlos Gimenez to build Brightline a new station at Aventura and bring rail service to that area. A majority of commissioners approved the plan at the meeting on Friday. ALEXIA FODDRE FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article235992038.html?mc_cid=21847f8562&mc_eid=5044cce498
https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article235992038.html?mc_cid=21847f8562&mc_eid=5044cce498
(Retrieved 10/14/2019)

TCRPC, SFRPC, and SFRTA partner to create award-winning TOD Outreach Program

The Treasure Coast and South Florida Regional Planning Councils, in partnership with the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority (SFRTA), created a Transit Oriented Development (TOD) Education and Outreach Program. The TOD Outreach Program was a collaborative, multi-agency effort to improve mobility, access, ridership, and transit-supportive land development potential for the Tri-Rail Commuter service operated by SFRTA by encouraging appropriate development patterns along the Tri-Rail corridor in Southeast Florida. Appropriate Transit Oriented Development will improve quality of life in the communities served by Tri-Rail and improve the success of the commuter rail system by promoting ridership.

An extensive outreach program engaging local governments and stakeholder agencies expanded understanding of Transit Oriented Development in the region. In addition, a regional Idea Exchange Network to facilitate adoption of TOD policies and zoning codes and subsequent project approvals. The program also established a more collaborative relationship between local governments, Metropolitan Planning Organizations, the Florida Department of Transportation, and the Regional Planning Councils while positioning the SFRTA as a resource and development partner for station-area land development and infrastructure investments.

The program received a 2019 Regional Leadership and Excellence Award from the National Association of Regional Councils on June 11, 2019 at NARC's 53rd Annual Conference and Exhibition in Omaha, Nebraska.

TRANSIT ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT POLICY
Advancing Vibrant Communities and A More Prosperous Region (adopted April 2017)

SUMMARY OF KEY TOD PLANNING BENCHMARKS

- Pedestrian-Friendly Spaces** that extend at least a half mile from stations, create safe environments and reduce auto-dependency.
- Higher Density** benefits ridership and local economies, especially when it exceeds 75 du/acre and includes housing for all walks of life.
- Increased Mix of Uses** creates vibrant communities near transit stations. The greatest market flexibility occurs when only nuisance uses are prohibited rather than traditional zoning.
- Limited or No Parking** stimulates business investment, generates local revenue, and encourages people to use transit. In some locations, parking requirements may be eliminated for the best TOD outcomes.

Source: Don Harmon & Associates